**TRIVIAL PURSUIT**

November 27, 2016

1st Sunday of Advent

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

[Isaiah 2:1-5](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2016/11/27/#rcl-first-reading)

[Psalm 122:1-9](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2016/11/27/#rcl-psalm)

[Romans 13:11-14](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2016/11/27/#rcl-second-reading)

[Matthew 24:36-44](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2016/11/27/#rcl-gospel)

Text: *For as in the those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark.*

Matthew 24:38

Lord Jesus, you've come among us, but not as we expected. We expected power; you came as vulnerability. We expected glory; you came among the poor. We expected the Lord on our terms; you transformed the world into God's terms. Lord, give us grace to love you as you are, not as we would have you to be.

Speak a word of hope to us today from the ancient text of scripture that we might have light to follow our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

A

Jewish couple from New York was visiting Jerusalem. As they waited patiently at a busy intersection for the "walk" signal, a young man sped across the street against the light.

An elderly gentleman standing nearby turned and said sadly, "Two thousand years he's waiting for the Messiah, and he can't wait for a light." But, this is an impatience we understand. This waiting and expectancy is the theme of Advent . . . a theme for the church which is challenged by economic realities which push us to throttle forward to Christmas without examining the preparation for our celebration of the incarnation.

Advent is a time for us to ponder the purpose for which Jesus was sent to earth. When we are pushed to celebrate without the preparation we become a little more like the new pastor preacher who responded too quickly about his new call and accidentally twisted his words. He said, “I have come here to heal the dead, cast out the sick, and raise the devil.”

But, pondering the purpose of Jesus’ coming to earth is certainly a primary focus of Advent, a time of preparation and anticipation. It gets a little confusing for us when we have scriptures like this lesson from Matthew 24 which say: *Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.* It is a passage which tells us that Jesus will come like a thief in the night, on ordinary days when we are going about routine, an unknown time . . . even to the angels in heaven. Now of course this text is trying to describe that moment when Jesus shall return, but his first arrival was to unexpected shepherds, foreign astrologers, a humble carpenter intent on saving the woman he loved from incredible embarrassment.

About 20 years ago, now, Robert G. Lee, whose book was being reviewed in *Christianity Today* imagined headlines for the return of Christ:

*Time Magazine* might read: "He's Man of the Millennium!"

*Field & Stream* might read like this: "Fisher of Men Returns"

*The National Enquirer* might say: "Christ Comes Back‑‑And He's Seen Elvis!"

And the headline for *Atheist Monthly* would simply read: "Oops!"[[1]](#footnote-1)

That's my favorite. "Oops." "Oops! I didn't know." "Oops! I forgot." "Oops! I thought You were kidding." "Oops! I made other plans."

Robert Tannehill, a prominent Biblical exegete says that we miss the impact of Matthew 24 in the English translation. *In the days of Noah, they were eating and drinking, marrying, being given in marriage. . . until the day when Noah entered the ark and they did not know until the flood came and swept them away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.* If we were to drone on with these words by orally reading them in the Greek they would become sing-song, repetitious, boring - like the daily rounds of much of our activity. These are the gray muzak elevator sounds that never cease. We are almost asleep in the ordinary activity of things when a crisis hits. It is during the redundant and routine that the Son of Man is revealed. What are we to do in a time such as ours? Or perhaps more to the point, what is God doing in a time like ours?

According to our Bible passage for today, that is what some people will be saying on that day: "Oops." Verses 40 and 41 read, "Two will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left." This last image Jesus uses is particularly vivid. A hand mill was a large grinding mill with a stone handle. It usually required two women to turn the handle. These women would be sitting on the ground, with their hands wrapped around the mill handle. They would be close enough to feel each other's breath. Their hands would be overlapping. And suddenly, according to this picture which Jesus gives us, one woman would disappear, and one would remain behind.

Some of you may be among the millions of fans of a series of novels by Tim Lahaye that are based on just this understanding of the Last Days. You can learn about them on leftbehind.com where they indicate that 63 million copies of the books have been sold. According to this theology, the worst thing that could happen would be to be left behind when Christ returns.

Most theologians have difficulty with this morning’s scripture passage. They feel it reflects the cosmology of a pre‑scientific world. It presumes a 3‑story universe with Earth in the middle, Heaven just above the clouds and Hell down below. We ought to be careful with our space rockets, if this picture is to be taken literally. We don't want to send one crashing through the Pearly Gates.

This same theme, of God’s salvation breaking in on us at an unexpected time is in the writing of Paul, too. Remember how we read:

*you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; {12} the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;*

Paul also says in this passage “Let us conduct ourselves becomingly . . . not reveling in drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy . . .” Here he makes a rather conventional assault upon life among the inhabitants of fraternity row. He is clear that the main reason he is down on alcohol abuse and immorality is that if we know what time it is, we would wake up, get with it, and be ready for God to break into our burglar-alarmed house and steal everything we have worked so feverishly to accumulate.

A quote from the turn of the last century provides the essence of this when it describes the worldly person by saying, “he knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." The world's motive is profit; the Christian's dynamic is the desire to serve. Both Paul and Jesus are saying, that we are too much on the trail of trivial pursuit and we need to be alert to the most important business of God’s intention.

But we muse in Old Testament . . . to every purpose under heaven there is indeed a season ‑ and a time for every process in every body: a time to be born (4:00 A.M. is the most common hour in humans), a time to die, as well as a time for your body to be active and a time for your body to sleep.

We all live two lives. In one we are conscious in mind and active in body. We work, play, love, talk, eat, travel, read, and busy ourselves with dozens of tasks. The other life (about one third of our time) is spent behind closed lids. Sleep is a beautiful part of our heritage.

Since sleep is a dominant behavior, it is a wonder that we haven't until lately, taken a serious look at it. Since the 1980s there has been a veritable explosion of research on sleep. About 600 articles and books are published annually. There are problems with apneas of different kinds, dreams inhibit sleep in some and enhance it for others. And of course I rather loathe the sound of Jimmy’s voice who is the commercial seller of Zyppah. He wants us to quit snorin’ so that the other people in the house can get some rest.

My problem is not so much with getting sleep as it is getting up. I rather stumble out of bed and head for the bathroom. Returning to the bedroom I sort of meet my other self - headed for the bathroom to shave. This is a dangerous time of day for anyone to be wielding a razor. At one time, I met with a group of men for breakfast and Bible Study at 6:00am on Wednesday mornings.

In an effort to be sensitive to Martha who had not yet arisen, I would set my watch. Somehow this thing worked well when set for the 24-hour clock better than it did for the 12-hour setting. I don't know what happened, but the thing didn't work quite right and I arrived woefully late to breakfast one morning. These rotten guys decided to fix my wagon. They resurrected their bodies extra early the next Wednesday and stealthily gathered outside my home where they prepared to make sure that I was going to be awake. They were armed with a Handy‑Andy, children's alarm clock which played a little tune mechanically with a message to wake up, wake‑up.

Now, if you will permit me to flip the mattress over ‑ some people get too much sleep. "Sleep drunkenness," it is called. Sleep "drunks" stay in bed so long that when they do manage to roll out they act like inebriates. They barely manage to get themselves dressed; their movements particularly their gait, are uncoordinated. Their judgment is clouded, and they seem unable to react appropriately to any external stimuli. They burn the toast and spill the coffee, their motor skills, their perception, and their judgement are all impaired because of over sleeping.

Paul, in this week's Epistle, seems to be speaking to such "sleep drunks." In fact, he mentions drunkenness a few verses after he issues a wake‑up call to the Romans: "...you know what hour it is," he writes, "how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep......the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness..."

The Christian has something better to live for than ease and sleep and self‑indulgence. The life of faith and Christian engagement is like rising eagerly from sleep to meet a new day which is the new life Christ makes possible. The metaphor of night as the present life and day as the life in God has other Biblical parallels. The person of faith rises from the dark kingdom of sleep and night to be alert and active in the brightness of a new day in the Lord.

Paul wants his readers to recognize that the Second Advent of Christ can occur at any time and that proper preparation for it is not lethargy, but spiritual fitness. **This is the message of Advent, that we get ourselves in spiritual shape for the meaning of the first Advent which we are about to celebrate.**

Christians living in first century Rome were admonished to remove their involvement in the excesses of contemporary Roman life which manifested themselves in drunkenness, sexual immorality and ill‑disciplined capitulation to the base instincts of the sinful nature. It is arresting to note that he adds "strife and envy" to the list, perhaps because the overt expressions of sinful living that were common to secular Rome, were now guilty of more civilized expressions of the same sinful indulgence.

Many Christians have "put off" the external evidences of selfish excess and indulgence but have failed to recognize that the unresolved conflicts and the intolerable frictions of their Christian relationships are often the same attitudes described by Paul dressed up in more acceptable garb.

Wake‑up, act like a person who is awake, and be watchful are the phrases that leap out at us from the Gospel and epistle texts for today. Jesus's wake‑up call was launched in terms of a parable. The Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into.

The tidings of the New Testament today are about Waking up and watchfulness, but the thrust of the Old Testament lesson concerns itself with peace.  It is a powerful word! charged with universal longing for harmony on earth, it challenges the mind and the imagination.

The Psalmist pleads:  "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!  'May they prosper who love you!  Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers!'  For my brethren and companions' sake I will say, "Peace be within you!'"

The promise of peace comes from the prophet Isaiah in the familiar image of people beating "their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks"; and the time is coming, he promises, when "nation shall not life up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. This is the message of hope as much as it is the message of peace.

How we desire to live up to the promise of peace.  But how?  Where do we begin?

We begin with ourselves.  That's where peace must always start.  In this broad and many‑faceted topic of "peace" we must recognize that peace starts with the individual.

John Bunyan wrote that if "we have not quiet in our minds, outward comfort will do no more for us than a golden slipper on a gouty foot."  The Hebrew idea of peace (shalom) is not content with such implied alternatives, insisting rather upon having it all: a quiet mind with a golden slipper on a healthy foot.

This peace that is tied to hope is one that includes bodily health, prosperity, and related satisfactions to be sure, but it moves toward something more. Because these satisfactions require a measure of social stability, the meaning of the word was extended to include the relationships and attitudes of people which establish the atmosphere in which life may be enjoyed.  Since peace and this hope (ἐλπίς - elpis) come above all from God, they are basic characteristics of the Kingdom of God.  Hope shines forth because it is opposed to chaos and disruption, and therefore it is gives us confidence when there is harmony or integration of all aspects of life, both social and religious.  In the Old Testament hope and peace are primarily to be found within the community when the people are in the proper relationship with God.  It is the blessing of the covenant.

A long time ago now I was at a conference where the man sitting next to me was an East German citizen.  Reinhard was a pastor in the Evangelical Reformed Church of East Germany.  Our private conversations were stimulating and aggravating.  Reinhard said, "You in America hold up freedom as the highest value for your society while we revere justice."  I thought about that for a while.  I disagreed with Reinhard inwardly as I concluded that people wouldn't have risked their lives to go over the wall from East Berlin, if they believed that everything there was just. But justice to Reinhard meant that all would be paid about the same wage, all would be required to work, that the state would guarantee work for each person.  In his eyes, he saw the United States as a society where freedom reigned supreme and where the differences and opportunities between the haves and the have-nots was a vast gulf.

However, there was one especially moving moment for us both.  Something that neither of us had ever experienced before.  There was to be a service of communion at this conference.

Part of my personal history was connected for a brief while to Barry Black, a former chaplain at the U.S. Naval Academy at the time who took me to a Seventh Day Adventist Church long ago where their tradition included a foot washing service prior to receiving the sacrament.  You were to go to someone who had wronged you and to wash their feet and ask for forgiveness.  If you had committed sins for which you needed to be forgiven, you could request that someone wash your feet.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Well, before worship, Reinhard and I were in the men's room.  It wasn't all that big. "Do you think we will be able to come to the table together, Reinhard?"  I asked. Then without exchanging a word, we removed each other’s shoes, lost our balance and destroyed a couple of paper towels – and if the truth were better known – came close to destroying the paper towel dispenser, too - washing each other’s feet.  We swapped our prejudices, sought mutual forgiveness and prepared ourselves for the spiritual event that would soon take place. We had awakened that if we were to be people of hope, this is where our relationship needed to be focused.

After the conference worship service, we embraced and Reinhard said in my ear.  This is the only place where hope for our world can be found. Maybe we have to let go of trivial matters.”

“Yes, Reinhard, our unity in Christ transcends all. He is the power to forgive me, to forgive you, and for us to see each other as brothers in him."

Others looking on didn't know what was happening, but we did.  Reinhard is right. If hope for a new world order is to be found, it will be uncovered at the manger, at the cross, and at the communion table, long before it will be seen in our cultural identities.  When we make peace with God, with ourselves and with each other hope emerges and genuine love has a chance.

1. Robert G. Lee in *Comedy Comes Clean*, by Adam Christing (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Barry Black, who I met and with whom I took classes at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, eventually became Admiral Barry Black and is today the chaplain of the U.S. Senate. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barry\_Black [↑](#footnote-ref-2)